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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER” (Part 1)
Jeremiah 22:1-5

☑ In a Miss Manners column dated April 6, 2010, a “Gentle Reader” asks:

Dear Miss Manners: What is wrong with people? What happened to the politics and religion rule?

There are people in my van pool and co-workers who think that everyone benefits from hearing their political views. ...they all share a common opinion that is simplistic and naïve.

It puts people who are not in agreement in a no-win situation. Do I speak up and cause acrimony in the van pool? Do I speak up and cause more acrimony and retribution at work....

In reply, Miss Manners observes that **“In this society, most of the acrimony short of violence is over religion and/or politics, and it doesn’t always stop short of violence. And those who are supposed to be dealing with these topics professionally aren’t behaving much better.”**

Discussed separately, issues of politics and religion can be contentious. Discuss them at the same time, and the tension is bound to escalate.

Let’s talk about religion and politics.

☐ Please turn to Jeremiah 22.

⊙ As we start, we must acknowledge that this Scripture was not written *to* us. Sovereign God initially spoke this to a small, old world, pre-industrial, pre-technological monarchy with a state religion. The U.S.A. is a huge, new world, post-industrial, hi-tech republic with no official religion. We cannot make a sweeping application of this text to our situation.

⊕ Still, this Scripture was written *for* us. The principles and truths of this passage transcend time, place, and culture, {Heb 4:12} **“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit... it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”** Like all other Scripture, it {2 Ti 3:16} **“is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training” us “n righteousness.”**

■ Jeremiah 22:1-2: **“This is what the LORD says: ‘Go down to the palace of the king of Judah and proclaim this message there; “Hear the word of the LORD, O king of Judah, you who sit on David’s throne – you, your officials and your people who come through these gates.””**

This king is most likely Zedekiah, yet he is not named here. The omission implies that this message is addressed to every Hebrew king, every royal administration, and everyone who ever has access to their power. YHWH directs his word at the political establishment and people with connections.

Let us be clear that Washington D.C. is not Jerusalem. The U.S. is not a theocracy. The Living God has never made a covenant with this nation.

Consequently, Holy God has never, is not now, and never will be registered as a Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, or any other kind of partisan. He gives his allegiance to no political party or movement.

🕒 Yet he is highly attentive to our political policy and conduct. Now, as in the seventh century B.C. his Scripture speaks to government structures and officials – and from a specific point of view.

■ Jeremiah 22:3: **“This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his [her] oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.”**

YHWH’s demands on government can be summarized in 2 words: justice and righteousness.

⚙️ As for justice, the Hebrew word mishpāṭ has a broad range of meaning. It includes: a) the correct use of executive power within the limits set by God; b) the beneficial use of legislative power to serve everyone; and c) the honorable use of judicial power to punish the wicked and protect the weak.

☺️ All three are equally important; but we only have time to elaborate on one: judicial honor. It prevails when the laws reflect God’s standards and are enforced honestly and fairly. Such justice is legal in nature, but it has profound social and economic implications.

○ For example: Leviticus 25:35-38 commands that when an Israelite falls into poverty and is no longer able to support him- or herself, a family member, friend or neighbor must help them. Quote: **“Do not take interest**

of any kind from him... You must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at a profit.”

Imagine that a person becomes poor and is desperate to feed his family. A next-door neighbor agrees to lend him some money, provided he pays it all back with interest. Or he offers to sell him some food at cost, but then jacks up the price. The victim realizes that he has been conned. He files charges, and the local judge hears the case.

If the judge requires the offender to pay back the interest or sell more groceries at cost, then the law has been enforced honestly and fairly. Not only so, the poor man’s dignity has been protected. This might be just enough of a boost to get back on his feet.

If, on the other hand, the judge takes a bribe to dismiss the case, or he even compels the victim to repay the loan with interest, then the law is dishonored. Not only so, a poor man’s dignity is trashed, and his family has been pushed further down into poverty.

No judge is sinless. No institution is immune to corruption. When push comes to shove, the courts tend to side with the rich and powerful. Their bias can be subtle or blatant, unconscious or intentional.

In seventh century Judah the sleaze is brazen and calculated, in part because juries do not exist. Verdicts are rendered exclusively by judges who answer only to the king. The system is rotten with false accusations, bribery, and influence peddling. It is the poor who suffer most, especially foreigners, orphans, and widows.

“**This is what the LORD says**” to the king, his officials, and those who have access to the palace: “**Do what is just.**”

☼ Back to verse 3: “**The LORD says: Do what is... right.**” The word *ts^edāqâ* boils down to compliance with God’s law (both its letter and spirit), and conformity to God’s character. It is internal and external, private and public, individual and corporate. It takes shape in human thought, word, deed and relationship.

☺ Righteousness prevails when individuals, organizations, and institutions speak, act, and relate in obedience to God’s priorities and standards as revealed in his Law. Righteousness is social and economic in nature, but it has significant legal implications.

No wonder Old Testament Law includes hundreds of ethical and civil guidelines designed to promote righteousness in every dimension of life:

- ♦ The commandment to “**Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength**” (Deuteronomy 6:5) cultivates right relationship with God;
- ♦ The second commandment, to “**love your neighbor as yourself**” (Leviticus 19:18), cultivates right relationship with others;
- ♦ The 10 Commandments cultivate right relationships with God and neighbor; and,
- ♦ Most of the laws pertaining to commerce, agricultural practices, property, sex, labor relations, provision for the poor, and protection of the weak, cultivate right social and economic relationships.

“**This is what the LORD says**” to the king, his officials, and those who have access to the palace: “**Do what is... right.**”

Power are distributed and exercised differently here. Accordingly, injustice and corruption take forms that seventh century Hebrews might not recognize.

And unlike Judah this is not a theocracy. The First Amendment to the constitution states that “**Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.**”

So, how shall we respond to Jeremiah 22? *How does this teaching speak to 21st century North America?*

✈ 1st, in regard to government, from D.C. all the way down to our local precincts, we can use every legal and ethical means available (prayer, our ballot, petitions, and so forth) to establish and maintain structures that advance justice and righteousness, and to pass and enforce laws that are just and right, and to encourage officials to “**do what is just and right.**” Not just for our district, for our tax bracket, for our affinity group – for everyone – including those with whom we disagree.

✈ 2nd, we can use our own power justly and rightly to benefit others. Some will protest, “Power?! I have no power!” But everyone who cares for a child, who manages employees, volunteers, or students, or who directs the flow of money, information, or opportunity has power. Many of us fill defined positions of power

here at church, at home, at work, or in our community organizations. Most who do not (such as our young children) have some influence over peers and loved ones. Even the smallest pond has its big fish.

What you and I do for or against justice and righteousness at home, at church, at school, at the office, at the store, on the street, and in the voting booth matters to God. For better or for worse, it changes the world for future generations.

■ Jeremiah 22:4: **“If you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings who sit on David’s throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by their officials and their people.”** Justice and righteousness are the way of peace, steadfastness and security for individuals, households, communities, and entire nations.

■ And Jeremiah 22:5: **“But if you do not obey these commands, declares the LORD, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin.”** Injustice and unrighteousness are the way of strife, instability and insecurity for individuals, households, communities, and entire nations.

Jeremiah 22 was not written *to* us, but it was written *for* us. It is the word of the Lord.